

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Overview

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian novelist, journalist, short story writer and philosopher, who is particularly known for such novels as *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Notes from Underground* (1864), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). His insight into spiritual themes like forgiveness, grace, and dread magnetized Western readers and writers, in the century after his death; Nietzsche and Sartre brought Dostoevsky's understandings to the center of Existentialism, while playwrights like Chekhov translated Dostoevsky into deep and brooding theatrical themes. His *Notes from Underground* inspired Kierkegaard and Niebuhr to critical rethinkings of Christian theology.

Story

Crime and Punishment is a gripping murder story threaded through with themes of religious evil, grace, and the long path to redemption. The narrative is driven largely by the needs and unbalanced agonies of the protagonist, Raskolnikov.

The novel opens on the miserably poor rented digs of a former law student at the University of Saint Petersburg. This already deranged intellectual has formed the plan to murder an elderly lady pawn broker—both for cash and because he wants to free the world of trashy individuals; an intellectual persuasion he has picked up in the avant garde intellectual circles of the capital. While reflecting on his plan, he makes the acquaintance of a drunkard, Marmeladov, and through him of his daughter, Sonya, who is giving herself up to the life of prostitution, in order to support her family.

After lengthy reflection Raskolnikov carries out his plan for murder, kills the old lady and her sister, but in the end fails to make off with much money or jewelry, and is ultimately left with nothing but a disastrous sense of guilt and fear. Raskolnikov walks the streets of the city distractedly, openly curious for any news—it is all the buzz—about the murder of the old lady; and by coincidence, one day, comes on Marmeladov, who has been knocked down by a carriage, and with the help of Raskolnikov, and others, is taken back to his apartment. Raskolnikov gives his last few roubles to the drunkard's wife, a down payment on the change of heart which will eventually lead toward the redemption of the murderer.

Among other developments, that track Raskolnikov's deteriorating mental state, the distraught young man has fallen increasingly in love with Sonya, the pure hearted prostitute daughter of Marmeladov, and while confessing the murder to this young woman he is overheard by an evil minded suitor of Dunya—Raskolnikov's sister—and realizes that Svidrigailov, the suitor, now possesses blackmailing power over him. To add to Raskolnikov's anguish, at his vulnerability, he becomes aware that—in his strangely self exposing way of behavior—he has drawn the suspicious attention of the police detective Porfiry, who is now only looking for evidence with which to arrest Raskolnikov.

Sonya urges Raskolnikov to confess to the police, and reminds him that at this point Svidrigailov possesses hard evidence of Raskolnikov's guilt. But a further test awaits Raskolnikov, who learns that Svidrigailov has committed suicide, thus that Raskolnikov is cleared of that evidence of his guilt. Raskolnikov hesitates painfully on the brink of confession. But at Sonya's urging he gives in to honor, and confesses to Porfiry.

Raskolnikov is found guilty of murder, and sentenced to eight years in Siberia, where Sonya follows him. By the end of the novel Dunya, Raskolnikov's sister, has married Raskolnikov's best friend, Razhumikhin, while Raskolnikov's mother has died, unable to cope with the dreadful fate of her son. Raskolnikov,

meanwhile, struggles through the severity and isolation of his exile in Siberia, where he is enabled to survive only by the presence and love of Sonya, who has never abandoned him. As the virtuous whore, Sonya represents the grace which was lacking in Raskolnikov's life and world, although the murderer in Raskolnikov was from the moment of his crime thirsty for freedom from the terrible bondage he had brought down on himself.

Themes

Criminality. Raskolnikov's plan to murder the old lady pawn broker is an adventure in pure criminality. In part it is a byproduct of greed and poverty, but in part it is the result of Raskolnikov's desire to rid the world of one more cockroach.

Grace. Sonya is the most obvious symbol of grace, sticking with Raskolnikov even through the winters of Siberia, nursing him back to a degree of mental and physical health. Already in giving his last roubles to Marmeladov's widow, even Raskolnikov gives evidence of a budding grace within him.

Characters

Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov is a disillusioned intellectual, a former law school student now living in poverty, and feeding himself on such newfangled western ideas as that of the super-person—a version of what Nietzsche would later adopt—who has special existence rights in society.

Sonya. The daughter of the drunkard Marmeladov, and the saintly figure who went into prostitution in order to support her disintegrating family. She is the angel of mercy who follows Raskolnikov into Siberian exile, and sets him on the path to redemption.

Porfiry. The subtle and persistent police detective who ultimately receives the convicting confession of Raskolnikov. Porfiry plays a masterful cat and mouse game with the murderer, from the time he has first identified Raskolnikov's psychological portrait.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Raskolnikov (Introvert)

Character Raskolnikov, the dominant character in *Crime and Punishment*, is a student who has dropped out of University, and who is living in a small and squalid upstairs apartment in a busy and noisy part of St. Petersburg. He is driven--by the time we first meet him, trying to avoid his landlady to whom he is behind in the rent—by a broad idea of the 'great man'—Napoleon is his model—who is above ordinary human morality, and has the right to exceptional breaches of action, like the murdering of 'worthless' human beings. This becomes Raskolnikov's own plan, with fatal results. In the guilt he incurs, for this murder, Raskolnikov is forced to deal with himself profoundly, to seek grace, and to repent. He must recognize his own guilt.

Parallels Raskolnikov is a unique blend of superman theorist and guilty penitent, and intersects parts of any number of tortured modern souls. One thinks of Julien Sorel in Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* (1830), a subterranean and subversive survivor; of Balzac characters like Vautrin and Rastignac, in *The Human Comedy* (1799-1850), figures who move darkly and even criminally through the urban environment of 19th century Paris; of Alyosha in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880); or of Harry Haller, in Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927), who embodies the modern tone of isolation and aggression. One might even say that Raskolnikov has a trace of Hamlet in him, an isolated downer, with a metaphysical chip on his shoulder.

Illustrative moments

Unsure Shortly after returning to his room, and lying down exhausted, Raskolnikov begins to doubt his sanity. He feels he can no longer recall in any detail the scene he has just come from, or the pieces of

evidence he has left behind him. 'Now a strange idea entered his head: perhaps all his clothes were soaked and stained with blood, and he could not see it because his mental powers were failing and crumbling away...' He then began the agonizing effort to get rid of all the things that were stained or compromised by the recent violence.

Anxious The 'punishment' for Raskolnikov thus sets in slowly. There was a knock on his door, and the building porter, along with his housemaid, presented a 'grey paper folded in two and sealed with wax.' 'A summons, from the office, he said, as he handed over the paper.' 'What office?' 'I mean the police want to see you....everyone knows what office.' The summons, as we shortly learn, concerns overdue rent, and not the recent murder, but Raskolnikov hereby begins a nightmare of anxieties which will ultimately lead him to prison in Siberia—but not until he has suffered every torture of anticipation.

Restless Raskolnikov's effort to secure confidence and peace, after the turmoil of murder and fear, leads him into vast efforts to assure himself—he never can—that he has disposed of all the evidence of his crime. 'He walked along the Voznesensky Prospect towards the Neva, but another idea came to him along the way. "Why in the Neva? Why in the water at all? Would it not be better to go somewhere a long way off...?" And so his mind rips him from one solution to another, never resting content with any of the answers he gives himself.

Unbalanced By this stage Raskolnikov has rendered himself incapable of sustaining normal human relations. He finds this out when he visits his closest University student friend, Razumikhin, who tries to welcome him cordially but finds his old friend ill and shockingly transformed. Raskolnikov is shocked to be faced with this view of himself; he realized 'that he was less inclined than ever to enter into personal relations with anyone on the face of the earth.' With each such discovery, Raskolnikov becomes more aware of the fall-out of his violence, and of his inability to restore normalcy on the far side of that violence.

Discussion questions

Does Raskolnikov kill the old lady because he is downtrodden and poor, or because of his theory that some people are not worth living? Why does he pick her? Does he feel any immediate remorse for the killing?

What is Raskolnikov's relation to the police inspector, Zamyotov? Is he attracted to him, even while knowing that the inspector is tracking him?

Does Raskolnikov repent? Is he, in doing so, cleared of his guilt, or does his guilt remain, a fact in time, which he can do nothing about?

Sonya (Conscientious)

Character Sonya, daughter of the drunkard Marmeladov, is the girlfriend and spiritual protectress of Raskolnikov, whose murder of the old pawnbroker is the centerpiece action of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Although poverty, and her stepmother's rough treatment of her, have forced Sonya to a career in prostitution—for which she carries an official 'yellow ID card'—she is arguably the one pure soul in this novel of crime and punishment. She remains with Raskolnikov through his stages of confession and ultimate imprisonment in Siberia, and embodies, if anyone in the novel does, the virtues of forgiveness, good conscience, and above all caring.

Parallels In *Gilgamesh* Enkidu, a beast of the wilds, formed by saliva and clay by the God, is sent to tame and humble the hero Gilgamesh. But in order to be civilized enough to become Gilgamesh' buddy, he must first be sexually sated by the prostitute Shamhat, who releases Enkidu from his bondage to mere nature. Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' closest followers, and the one most faithful at the time of his Crucifixion—as recounted in the Christian New Testament—features extensively in Christian literature and art. (An instance would be Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*, 2003.) Nathaniel Hawthorne has created one of literature's most loveable 'fallen women' in Hester Prynne, the 'adulteress' of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In *Notes from Underground* (1863) Dostoyevsky (once again) probes the

mysterious collusion between sin and sanctity, creating in his Liza a fallen woman rich in spirit who offers much needed love to the Underground Man.

Illustrative moments

Compassionate Eventually, and before anyone else, Sonya hears Raskolnikov's murder confession. "O God,' burst in a terrible wail from her breast," as she realized what Raskolnikov was telling her, and while she knew precisely what he was thinking, about advancing on the pregnant Lizaveta with an axe. Her secondary reaction, however, is the distinctive one: "What have you done, what have you done to yourself,' she said despairingly, and, starting up, threw herself on his neck, embraced him, and held him tight." She broke into hysterical sobbing, thinking of what a death in life he had created for himself.

Worried Sonya responds to Raskolnikov's confession by saying that 'I will follow you wherever you go...Why, why didn't I know you before? Why did you not come before? Oh God!' We understand that the deeper is Raskolnikov's pain of evil, the more inseparably Sonya is drawn to him. Yet she is soon forced against her own limits, as Raskolnikov expounds, to her, his 'great man' theory, fascination with Napoleon, and his sense that some humans are not worth living. When he calls the pawnbroker a 'useless, vile, pernicious louse' it is far too much for Sonya, who senses he may be on the brink of madness.

Fierce When Raskolnikov asks Sonya what he should do, now that he has made his confession to her, and is ready to go public with it, she is brisk with her response: 'Go at once, this instant, stand at the crossroads, first bow down and kiss the earth you have desecrated, then bow to the whole world, the four corners of the earth, and say aloud to all the world: I have done murder!' When Raskolnikov replies that he can never broadcast his sin, Sonya replies that he will then no longer be a human being. Raskolnikov asks if she means prison for him, to which Sonya replies yes, assuring him she will be with him in prison too.

Probing When Raskolnikov asks Sonya if she should not abandon him, and forget the idea of visiting him in prison, she asks him whether he 'wears a cross'? She gives one of her two crosses to him, a true pledge, and keeps for herself the cross she received from Lizaveta, the victim of Raskolnikov's axe. Nothing less than this union in their mutual savior, it seems, could suffice to move the atonement to a new level. Nothing less than the cross of the murdered woman could serve as Sonya's offering to the cause of reconciliation. 'When you accept your suffering, you shall put it on,' says Sonya, seeing far into the future forming around Raskolnikov.

Discussion questions

What drives Sonya's determination to stick with Raskolnikov and to care for him in his exile? Does the story have a happy ending?

Does Sonya manage to make Raskolnikov repent? What is the evidence for that?

Is Sonya's career in prostitution a rich and valuable foundation for her spirituality? Was prostitution a rough life in 19th century St. Petersburg? If so, how did Sonya convert her career into a foundation for her spirituality?